



## **Lynn Coleman**

Oral History Transcription

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Interviewed by:	Amy Selner and Jennifer Fanning
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Transcribed by:	Zoë Morgan, Student Worker, Civil Rights Heritage Center
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Summary:	<p>Lynn Coleman discusses in detail the “breaks” or “blessings” that changed the direction of his life and led him to his career with the police department, his work with juveniles and his current position with the mayor’s office. Coleman credits the people that helped him along the way and discusses the importance of giving back, teaching and setting an example, not only for black youths, but for the community-at-large.</p>

0:00:17 [AS] Behind like, uh...

[LC] It's on the corner of Jefferson and Falcon Street.

[AS] Right, which is kind of behind the Mexican restaurant on Western Avenue. Falcon is right back in there, right?

[LC] Mmhm, yeah.

[AS] What— when Gladys and Charlotte was at the press conference last Thursday, two weeks ago Thursday, whatever it was, they talked about finding employment was hard for black people in this community. Did you...?

[LC] Still is.

[AS] Yeah. In the police department, when you went into police, how many, what was the diversity of our police department at that time?

[LC] It was about 200 and when I came on it was like 260 policemen, somewhere close to that, and 17 of us were black.

[AS] Wow, what is it today?

[LC] About the same total number. Probably about 30.

[AS] Are black? That's it?

[LC] Not good.

[AS] No.

[LC] Not good.

0:01:30 [AS] During the Civil Rights movement, that was one of the things that they fought for in Selma and Birmingham, was the right to have black police officers and to get black police officers on the squad. But, both of those cities found out sometimes it did them more damage at first because they wanted black police officers in black areas.

[LC] Well, and you're right. During the twenty-two years that I was on the police department, obviously that was always an issue of concern for me. I remember back in the early '80s, we had an organization called Minority Police Officers Association, and we actually filed suit against the city for hiring and promotional practices for minority officers. We lost the suit in federal court, but we did draw some attention to the fact that they needed to hire some more black folks and that happened.

0:02:37 In talking to some of the older black officers that were around the— James Robinson, Moon Mullins, who is dead now, just died, the first part of this year, was a wealth of information and that kind of thing. You would hear them talk about black officers not arresting white people or working in black districts and that kind of thing.

[AS] That was the only place that they could work.

[LC] Yeah, mmhmm, yeah.

[AS] Which actually, they said it created more havoc because instead of self-promoting black men into better positions or places of authority, it actually worked the other way, because then they looked at them as turncoats and, and, and...

0:03:26 [LC] You had those kind of issues too, but then again, remember the phrase I used earlier: you can do more from the inside out, then you can from the outside... At least you got somebody on the inside, and if that somebody is willing not only to do his or her job, but is willing to try to help somebody else to get to where they are, it's a benefit, okay. Now, if that person only uses the job selfishly for themselves, and not caring about anyone else, well it's not a benefit, it could be a detriment, and they're right. So, you know, it's up to the individual then, you know, to work it. Two things need to happen: at least we need to make sure that we get blacks and minorities represented across the board, okay. Secondly, we have to support them, once they get there, okay. Like the young man that I just talked to a while ago, I hadn't heard from him in years, okay.

[AS] When you need something...

[LC] He needs something, you call here and bitch and raise hell... I don't have a problem with that, but then when you see me, speak. "Hi, Lynn. How you doin'? How you feel man? How's it goin'?" You know. "Is there anything we can do for you?" Sometimes that's good to hear, okay.

[overlapping conversation] So, you know, it's a two-way street.

[AS] It would be nice at least.

0:04:48 [LC] We got a long way to go, and we're still not there yet. One of the big problems that I have is that, you have a lot of black folks, young black men, that get arrested, even today, for disorderly conduct, public intoxication, resisting law enforcement, misdemeanor, minor deals, but they're still cases. Once you get involved in the criminal justice system, you catch hell for getting out, if you ever do, okay.

[AS] You can't shake it loose.

[LC] Then it affects, you know, job opportunities, you know, it affects advancements. In fact, I'm dealing with a young man right now that I've got to make a phone call for, who is trying to do some positive things and turn his life around, and they're telling him that he can't because he's got some felony convictions on his record, okay, which he says he doesn't, the system says he does. He was arrested for some felonies, but he wasn't convicted of the felonies.

[AS] Convicted... So it shouldn't be on there, correct?

[LC] So... Right, so, or it certainly shouldn't be used against him. So it's just a on going battle.

0:06:06 [AS] So, and this doesn't have a question so much historically, but currently, what functions, groups, organizations exist today that foster or promote black men from early ages? I mean, you know, to help them... One of my big deals is, where I went haywire was, I had three older brothers and sisters that mom and dad's attention was, so I didn't feel that I was getting a share of attention. I went out and looked for ways to get attention, and those were those high school years, those formative years. What programs do we have in place, or organizations, or anything besides the church that help youth through those tough transitional years?

0:06:54 [LC] I think one of the problems that we have is that we can't look at organizations to always fill that void, okay. I think they can, but I think in absence of those you have to have other things. One of the major organizations, I think, is the church, and you say minus the church, but I don't think you can minus the church in that. I think the church has to play a pivotal role in it. I think local chapter of NAACP, Urban League has to and I think our Urban League is doing a good job with the Nu-Lites program, you know. Now, will that encompass all kids? No, but at least some.

[AS] Right, it catches some.

[LC] I think programs like Black Expo, and they have a youth group here.

[AS] Do they?

0:07:46 [LC] Yeah, and they do some stuff. I think programs like the YMCA, when minority— I mean Urban Youth Services branch, they do some stuff with young kids. I think places like the Colfax Cultural Center, Charles Martin Center, IBIC: I Believe I Can, the Steel band group. You know, so they're the, you know. LaSalle Center, King Center, True Soldiers with uh, yeah...

[AS] Yeah, he's doing great.

[LC] I think— and then outside of that there are some individuals, okay, that don't run around with a banner over their head, okay, that's out doing a multitude of stuff, you know. Whether it's in their daily occupation, stretched or, you know, out of their way, and I'm thinking right off the top of my head, people like the Tony Scotts, okay. People like the George McColloughs. People...

[AS] Well I would say you because, what you did at Riley... My mom's not a complimentary person to a whole lot of people, you know that. You know my mom well enough to know that. But, she even talks today about how many of the kids you actually saved from ruin.

0:09:07 [LC] You know what? That was probably one of the best times of my life. I met an awful lot of good people, lot of good relationships, lot of kids. And again, you will know that you are successful not when you get to the top of the mountain, but when you get there and you reach back and try to help somebody else. I didn't want to go the Riley High School to work, okay. I went to Riley High School to work for two reasons: George McCullough and Algie Oldham, okay. Algie Oldham, I've got all the respect and love in the world for him, he's just an awesome guy. George McCullough and I grew up together, he's from The Lake.

[AS] George is?

[LC] Oh yeah, oh yeah.

[AS] That surprises me, I mean, that just surprises me.

[LC] George is from The Dump.

[AS] That surprises me.

[LC] In fact, George lived on Kenmore Street, and then he lived on Lake Street, right... George is from The Dump. That's where George is from.

[AS] That surprises me.

[LC] That's his roots, and that's why I went to Riley High School. Again, when I went, kids was always my thing, and I found an opportunity there to help kids, and that's what I wanted to do. To embrace them, to chastise them, okay, to put them in their space...

[AS] You did.

[LC] But, at the same time, to embrace them and love them and let... and that picture right there...

[AS] The positive role model?

0:10:38 [LC] No, that picture right there... that's a result of Riley High School. Before that girl went to Riley High School I never knew her. Never knew her before in my life. Met her when she was a freshman, she graduated in '87. Her and I built a relationship and a bond and we adopted each other. She is now my daughter, okay. When she got married five years ago, she asked me to give her away, okay, and her father was alive. Out of all the people in this world that she could, you know... So that's what Riley High School, you know, meant to me and I enjoyed... So, I didn't say, but there's a lot of individuals that are out there that we might not never know...

[AS] That made impacts.

[LC] Yeah. Archie Brocker that worked at Upward Bound and that kind of stuff. The Algie Oldhams. Certainly the Charles Martins, you know. The Charles Blacks, you know...

[AS] Those are the ones we want to start replacing.

0:11:47 [LC] Those people touched and affected... I can remember the days that Charles Black would take basketball, kids that played basketball... Charles would go and rent a van, he would take money from him and his family and buy uniforms, and put kids in a van and take them to trips around the region to play in basketball tournaments. He would come home and take the uniforms to his wife, she would wash them, you know after they would get done playing that day, so that they could play again tomorrow, okay. Not only would he teach them the game of basketball, but he would tell them the importance of, you know, getting some books and being responsible and being respectful to others and those kind of things.

0:12:38 Charles Martin would deprive himself and his family the things that he could have been doing, should have been doing, and his phone would ring at 10:00 at night and some kid was having an issue. Running away from home, and that kind of... and he would get up and go find them, to help them out, you know. Kids would have a problem, and something was going on in town and that kind of thing. I can remember Charles would call me and say, "Look man, I was told that they're going to fight tomorrow at this location." "How do you know?" "It ain't important how I know, I know." And some kid would call him and tell him what was going on, and he would then call us and tell us, and we would be able to put a stop to it,

okay. So, uh, those kind of people, you know. The Gladys Muhammads that, you know, could have an opportunity to go and do things a lot of different places...

[AS] For a lot more money and a lot more...

[LC] But, still chose to stay and make a difference, so you know...

0:13:47 [AS] Speaking of the last note, and we'll let you go and you can do lunch, and it's Friday and all that other good stuff. We work with the Nu-Lites, and we're getting, you know, through the Civil Rights Heritage Center, we're taking a group of them to Memphis. But, one of their primary interests are racial profiling and the issues and I'm sorry, I don't mean to eavesdrop, but when you were talking to the gentleman on the phone, you know, how you handle it, how you, you know, once they do stop you, respond in a polite manner, you don't you know, because you're always alert. And I'm thinking, when I was riding with the bikers and that, it was the same thing. You couldn't say anything back because you were always going to lose, you're always on the losing end, because they have the badge, you're still going to lose.

[LC] And that's unfortunate, that's really unfortunate.

[AS] How can... Would you be available to even talk to the kids about...

[LC] Absolutely, absolutely.

[AS] ...some of the racial profiling issues?

0:14:40 [LC] Whenever. And one of the things we have to realize, and that's a buzz word across the country right now... What we have to realize, and especially in the black community, there's a thin line between racial profiling and enforcement, okay. A real thin line. You guys just left Ohio, and I don't know if you guys talked about that at all...

[AS] Yes, yes we did.

[LC] But, since they've had the police shootings down there...

[JF] The riots.

[LC] ...talked about the riots, the racial profiling and asked police not to be as aggressive in black communities and stuff like that... I understand that the crime and murder rate in that area has gone up, okay. Well, you know, again, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't, okay. Being a police officer, black, white or polka-dot, we still have a responsibility for enforcement. You have to do that.

[AS] To maintain things.

0:15:40 [LC] That's our job, okay. When you think about... When you think about the city of South Bend, okay. If you... The police, respond to calls for service, okay. That means somebody has picked up the phone and called the police and said, you know, "We got speeders here, or we got drugs here, or we got burglars here or...". You know, whatever. Calls for service dictates where you put your service.

[JF] Sure.

[LC] So, now if, and this is not an actual map, I'm not that good or smart, but if right here, in a community, okay, you've got 80% of calls for service there, okay. Here you got 5%, here you got 10%, and here you got 5%, okay, and that's what your calls for service look like. And again, this is just a dramatization and it could be a lot different, and I'm sure it is. But, if this is what's going on, okay, and you're the chief of police, okay or you're the police commissioner and it's time for you to sit down to deploy your resources... Where do you put them at?

[AS] They're all going over in the corner.

0:17:01 [LC] They go here, right? Now, if you put your resources here, and this happens to be a minority community, what is that going to look like? Okay.

[JF] Sure.

[LC] It's going to look like that's where all your police are, right? Now, if you are a black man riding through there, okay. What's the chances of you getting stopped here, versus getting stopped there?

[AS] Oh, you know you're going to get stopped over there.

[LC] Why?

[AS] Because that's the hot bed. At least you'd think so.

[LC] Could it be that you're getting stopped here because there is more police here? Okay, and because there's more police there, the chances of them seeing you, watching you without a seat belt or watching you, you know cruise, you know... What's the chances of you seeing a police over here?

[AS] Not very.

[LC] Okay. So if you got more police in this area, you're probably...



[JF] You're going to get more, sure.

0:18:07 [LC] Okay, so that's an issue, okay. Now, so you have to put more police over there because of calls for service. Now, if I don't put police here, okay, and I put them all over there because I want them to stay out of here, because of the fact that I don't want anybody thinking that I am harassing anybody, or picking with anybody, or whatever. If I don't put police over here, what's going to happen with these calls for service? They're going to go up, okay.

[AS] But, when we were there yesterday too, we were reading the different exhibits on the wall, because we actually saw there, they put up a museum exhibit about the riots of Cincinnati, which come to find out started in 1729. They've had a long history of riots. But, out of one of Fred Shuttlesworth's quotes was, "Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the last three years, six years, have had one fatality in the line of duty". As in, a black man shot. Cincinnati's had twenty-five.

[LC] It's crazy.

0:19:14 [AS] Right, that's what I thought, and automatically I'm thinking, "Oh my God, now what are these people thinking? There's got to be something screwed up here". Well, then on that exhibit they showed the twenty-five cases. Now, granted, it's on a museum wall, you know, it's not the actual court records or documents, or that. But, some of them, for example, one of the twelve-year-old boy, black boy that got shot and killed... You know what he was doing at the time? He was dragging a black police officer eight hundred feet behind his car...

[LC] It was stolen.

[AS] Officer had the audacity to ask him for his driver's license, him being twelve years old. What the officer did, trying to save his own life, was fired two shots up to try to get the car to stop and shot him in the chest. Well, the officer died in the line of duty cause he was then thrown off the car, bounced off the street and hit himself with a tailpipe from another car, and he was killed too, but yet...

[LC] We don't talk about that.

0:20:17 [AS] It's the twelve-year-old boy, and I'm going, "Well, wait a minute, if I'm being drug behind a car, I'm shooting him too". I mean, let's face it. So, I mean there was such, there was like four or five cases in there, that were cases like that. Where they...

[LC] And see, you know, again...

[AS] You can't include those, I guess.

[LC] You have to include them, because they happened, okay. You can't polish them up and say, you know, "This is what happened..."

[AS] Right.

[LC] ...but we don't want to screw the numbers, so we'll take that one out". If that's...

[AS] It happened, yeah

[LC] ... if that's the way it falls, you've got to put them in there, okay. Hopefully somebody is not only examining, but telling the true story.

[AS] Right.

[LC] My opinion...

[AS] It might have been twenty-two cases, but of those twenty-two cases there were— I was perusing 'em, there was like six of them that would have been questionable that, that, you know, somebody didn't think their actions clearly all the way through before they happened.

0:21:15 [LC] Well see, we've got some responsibilities ourselves. When I say we, meaning the black community, we have to make sure that we are instructing and teaching and setting examples and stuff like that for our young black kids, okay. So that they don't get caught up in the situation that you just, you know, described.

As far as police go, it's a hell of a deal, you know, it's a catch 22. If Miss Smith calls and says that, you know, "I live on the corner of Fifth and Third," you know, "and every night we've got kids standing out on the corner, they're loud, they're screaming, they're drinking, they're peeing on the street". That kind of thing. "You all need to come out here and do something about it." You got to do something about it, okay, and she stays right here, she stays right here, okay. So, we send two policemen out there, and when the policemen pull up, there's fifteen kids out there, right here, okay. They start hollerin' and screaming. "What are you all out here for? You all pickin' with us. You only out here cause we're black". So, now the policemen don't go in there because they don't want to be accused of harassment, you know...

[AS] Racial profiling.

0:22:36 [LC] ...racial profiling, uh, those kind of things, okay. So they don't go, so they satisfy that group. But, Miss Smith is saying, "You all don't come. You

all won't come to my community, because I'm black." "If this was happening over here, you all would go, you all wouldn't allow that to happen." Okay, so you're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't, okay. One of our problems is that we don't have enough black police officers, okay. So if we had, you know, more minority police officers dealing with those issues, okay, it wouldn't look like, all the time, that white police officers was going to serve or solve black problems— it's real interesting.

[AS] Is big John still out there?

[LC] Yeah, but see, you think about thirty police...

[AS] I think we were all scared of him.

[LC] You think about...

[AS] He says, we do.

[LC] ...about thirty police officers, okay, in the city. If you think about that number, okay, I'd be willing to bet you right now that out of the thirty-seven, I mean, out of that thirty, I'd be willing to bet you that right now twenty-three of them are not in uniform.

[AS] Because you think they've promoted them?

0:23:52 [LC] They are either, yeah. They are Divisional Chief Kyle, you've got Captain John Williams, okay. You've got Captain Boykins, who's in uniform, but then you've got Lieutenant Collins, you've got Sherry Taylor in D.A.R.E., you've got Mattie Taylor on D.A.R.E., you've got Eric Crittendon in school resource officer, got Joe Walker there. You got...

[AS] Well why are we doing this?

[LC] Huh?

[AS] I know this is not, it's a complicated issue...but, if you and I can sit here and talk about these issues and look at 'em and see the obvious, why can't anybody, I mean...?

0:24:40 [LC] Well see, it's deeper than that. John Collins comes to you, you're the Chief of Police, and there's an opening for a job, okay. He comes to you, and he puts in for that job, okay. He's qualified, you know, seniority, knowledge and that kind of thing. He's got, you know, fifteen years on the job, okay. He applies for that job, okay, he's in uniform... Do you give him that job or do you deprive him...?

[AS] Because you need him on the street.

[LC] Because you need him on the street, okay, and not give him the opportunity to do something different, okay.

[AS] So do they have a minority recruitment program?

[LC] A recruitment program? No, they got a strong effort to hire minorities, okay. Are we doing as good as we should do? Probably not, okay. Could we do better? Probably yes, okay. But, it's not all our fault, and when I say ours, meaning the city and, you know.

[AS] Sure, well you've got to have people out there actually willing to apply for the job, you can't drag them there.

[LC] They've got to be willing to apply, and once they apply they have to be qualified to do it too. Qualified not only means intellectually qualified, okay. Again, a lot of us...

[AS] Attitude.

[LC] A lot of us... Well, not even attitude. A lot of us, our past life precludes or prevents us from, you know, and we don't think about it. Again, my break, okay...

[AS] Was before...

0:26:05 [LC] My break, okay. Chances are, if I was doing what I had done twenty years ago now, and applied for the police department, I probably, I might not get on, okay. If you go and apply and then, you know, "Did you ever smoke dope?" "Yeah". "You ever sold any dope?" "Yeah". "You ever stole?" "Yeah". You know, chances are...

[AS] So are you telling me I won't become a police officer?

[LC] Probably not, you know. You ever sold any drugs? You ever sold any cocaine? You know, there's an awful lot of young kids out there that, you know, have you know, been involved in...

[AS] Yeah, and if they're going to be honest, you get penalized...

0:26:49 [LC] And if they don't be honest, and they ask them on the polygraph, and then they flunk the polygraph, okay, then it shows deception, so you lose them, okay. So, it becomes a struggle, you know, to try to meet that. You know, can we do some other creative things to make it? Yeah. We have to sort of get out of the box, and I think that Chief Bennett and them are

trying to do that. In fact, I talked to a young man, yeah, I talked to a young man last night that's interested. He's thirty-five years old, he's real close, he's turned his life around, he's doing some different things. Uh...

[AS] And he wants to...?

[LC] He wants to be a cop. He just filed bankruptcy.

[JF] Hmm, nope.

[AS] What does that have to do with anything?

[JF] Credit.

[LC] But, but...and probably not...

0:27:35 [AS] What, do they think he's going to become a thief since he didn't... He filed bankruptcy?

[JF] No, they don't want that on there, correct?

[LC] Yeah.

[JF] Because that shows, if you've got the financial burden and problem, that shows you can be right on that line...

[LC] You can have the propensity of doing that, oh yeah.

[AS] So that means that, like what? You knock out forty percent of the society any more, I mean there's a lot of people filing bankruptcy.

[JF] I think that's a big problem because it's a disproportionate number.

[LC] And it is, and I'm not saying that he will be knocked out, okay. But, if you're struggling and you need twenty extra dollars, okay, and you are out there in a position where you can make it happen relatively easy, okay. I could, you know, I could very well be putting you in a situation, okay, and so I have to be careful with that.

[AS] Alright. It just that it seems like we are throwing up so many roadblocks.

[LC] But, that's what life is though.

0:28:28 [AS] But, but pretty soon, I mean, if we keep.... The way our society, especially, I mean, I could see the drug thing and that, but when you get to the financial issues... Tell me, who hasn't had a financial issue?

[LC] Ah, Ah, ah, ah... I'm not saying that.

[AS] That, I mean, that's I think we're getting a little...

[LC] Yeah, but...

[AS] ...it's cutting it close.

[LC] But, but you have to consider all of that though, you really do.

[AS] I can see taking it into consideration, I think that makes sense.

[LC] And I'm not saying that it will automatically get him...

[AS] But, it shouldn't throw you out of the pool.

[LC] But, but, and then I'm not saying that it will, okay.

[overlapping conversation]

[LC] But, but they have to at least take it under consideration, and look at the totality of it, you know. Why? What caused it? How long have you been there?

[AS] Well, like if you went through a divorce, and you know, he has to pay off his wife's, you know, sixty thousand whatever... I mean, there are reasons for it.

0:29:17 [LC] Yeah, and I'm not saying it will, I'm just saying, you know, that those are some of the things, obstacles that are out there, and life are full of them. Life is full of them, okay.

[AS] Oh, yeah, don't we know it. We're always hassling with doing the high hurdles.

[LC] So, uh, but that's, you know, some of the challenges and problems that we face.

[AS] Well, we're going to get out of here because otherwise I could talk to you all day, because you're such... You're the man in the know.

0:29:42 [LC] I am nothing...

[Audio ends]